



From Servants to Workers: South African Domestic Workers and the Democratic State

Shireen Ally

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In the past decade, hundreds of thousands of women from poorer countries have braved treacherous journeys to richer countries to work as poorly paid domestic workers. Scholars and activists denounce compromised forms of citizenship that expose these women to at times shocking exploitation and abuse.

In *From Servants to Workers*, Shireen Ally asks whether the low wages and poor working conditions so characteristic of migrant domestic work can truly be resolved by means of the extension of citizenship rights. Following South Africa's "miraculous" transition to democracy, more than a million poor black women who had endured a despotic organization of paid domestic work under apartheid became the beneficiaries of one of the world's most impressive and extensive efforts to formalize and modernize paid domestic work through state regulation. Instead of undergoing a dramatic transformation, servitude relations stubbornly resisted change. Ally locates an explanation for this in the tension between the forms of power deployed by the state in its efforts to protect workers, on the one hand, and the forms of power workers recover through the intimate nature of their work, on the other.

Listening attentively to workers' own narrations of their entry into democratic citizenship-rights, Ally explores the political implications of paid domestic work as an intimate form of labor. *From Servants to Workers* integrates sociological insights with the often-heartbreaking life histories of female domestic workers in South Africa and provides rich detail of the streets, homes, and churches of Johannesburg where these women work, live, and socialize.

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